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U.S. considers taking control of airport security

Posted at 12:15 a.m. PDT Wednesday, Sept. 19, 2001

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Mercury News

Federal officials are putting together a multibillion-dollar plan to beef up airport security by making the 16,000 people who operate metal detectors and X-ray machines government employees.

An aide to Rep. Mike Honda, D-San Jose, who serves on the House aviation subcommittee and who on Tuesday endorsed such a takeover, said a new tax may be needed to pay for that and other security upgrades, including putting armed sky marshals on airliners.

Lawmakers ``may have to bite the bullet on this one and build in some sort of tax," Honda press officer Ernest Baynard said. He said several members of the subcommittee are already discussing how big a tax may be needed, but what's being called a ``terrorism tax" by some is not Honda's idea.

A federal takeover of security checkpoints, which the airlines now pay contractors to operate, would save the airlines more than \$1 billion annually. It would also turn a post now staffed by \$7-an-hour, untrained personnel into a federal law enforcement position requiring detailed background checks and possibly firearms training, FAA officials said.

Neil C. Livingstone, chairman and chief executive of Globaloptions, a Washington-based security company and expert on airport security, said using a tax to pay for security ``is like buying insurance for your car. We're all going to need it. It amounts to a `terrorism tax.' "

Dozens of passengers at Bay Area airports said they would gladly pay for extra security and wait longer to board flights if federal officers required more thorough bag searches.

``They should do that. Why haven't they already?" asked Haiyan Zhang of Boulder, Colo., as she stood in line at San Francisco International Airport on Tuesday, watching security screeners in maroon blazers and gray pants wave a metal-detecting wand over every third or fourth passenger. ``Look at them. That is not security. They should be respected and feared."

Added Ute Wohlmuther, who was returning to the Netherlands after vacationing in the Bay Area: ``What's an extra dollar or an extra hour of your life, if you're still there when you get off the plane?"

Putting federal workers at airport security checkpoints would cost the government \$700 million each year in wages and \$300 million in maintenance and security upgrades, for a combined \$1 billion annual cost, according to a 1999 Federal Aviation Administration report to Congress.

The report is based on paying checkpoint screeners an average of \$7.50 an hour. Those wages would now have to be increased to at least \$10 an hour, FAA officials said.

Honda called Tuesday for a federal takeover of checkpoints after touring security facilities at San Jose International. Honda has also said he supports more secure cockpits on jetliners to prevent hijackers from gaining control of the aircraft, as well as other measures.

"Federalizing the screeners would make the process more efficient, more convenient, provide higher security, greater training and higher wages," Honda said.

Nationwide, the turnover rate among airport screeners exceeds 100 percent a year at most large airports. Turnover at one airport has topped 400 percent, "leaving few screeners with much experience at the checkpoints," according to a report last year by the General Accounting Office, the investigative arm of Congress.

But some in Congress are already wary of federalizing checkpoints.

"We believe that \$1 billion is a low estimate," said Adam Tsao, a staffer who helps draft legislation for Rep. John Mica, R-Fla., head of the House aviation subcommittee. "And we already have some concerns about how effective it might be."

Running airport security checkpoints would require the government to establish a new branch of the FAA or possibly the Treasury Department, Tsao said.

"I think the events of the last week have shown us we need to maximize our level of security, and the cost would be of secondary importance to that," said Lenny Alcivar, deputy director for public affairs at the Transportation Department.

Two teams of Transportation Department security experts Monday began studying the takeover of security checkpoints as well as outfitting every flight with armed air marshals and setting federal limits on carry-on bags. Their recommendations are expected by Oct. 1.

The Justice Department doesn't appear to be waiting for the recommendations or for Congress to authorize funding. The agency has begun training an undisclosed number of agents as armed air marshals in New Jersey.

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